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ABSTRACT

This paper, as the title suggests, presents a discussion of the dangers and possibilities of the external degree. There are 8 major dangers that widespread offering of external degrees might precipitate: (1) the deterioration of standards rather than quality education; (2) a proliferation of degrees that might debase the degree; (3) the use of the external degree as a political instrument by legislative committees; (4) the expectations that are being raised in many quarters concerning the degree without solidly developed program plans to support them; (5) the possibility of academic isolation of the student because of the reliance on television, cassettes, and correspondence courses; (6) the grave possibility of lack of relevance in external degree programs; (7) the threat to the future of private colleges; and (8) external degree programs cause debate over what constitutes an educated person, a consequence that may well turn out to be a helpful development. On the other hand, external degree programs: (1) offer a measure of flexibility and diversification; (2) offer the opportunity for individualized learning; (3) perpetuate the philosophy of lifetime learning; (4) increase the possibility of more community involvement; and (5) offer the opportunity of joining academic institutions with alternative systems of learning. (HS)

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Concurrent General Session II
Monday Morning, March 6

LESS TALK, MORE ACTION *
The Dangers and Possibilities of the External Degree

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I don't know how many times the statement will be made during this conference that these are unprecedented times for higher education. Since I have the advantage of appearing rather early in the program, I suppose I should seize the initiative and be among the first to state the obvious facts, certain to be uttered again and again: that we are being literally buffetted from within and without, shaken and occasionally uprooted, questioned and challenged as never before. A hurricane of change is upon us, the windows are already blown out, the walls are coming down, there are no storm cellars or bunkers in which we can hide, and academic life is thus more perilous and at the same time, more zestful. Just a year or two ago, the peril was internal and sometimes physically violent; today it comes from everywhere, it is steady pressure rather than violence, and it draws closer and closer to the fundamentals of our reasons for existing and the means to sustain life - whom we serve, what we offer, how we offer it, how we measure and reward progress, and how we pay for it all. A year or two ago, we were being roughly and plainly bludgeoned; today we are again being bludgeoned, but this time more subtly as though with a velvet hammer.

An old idea has suddenly found its time, as Alan Pifer has said. A democratic principle that was mouthed so often as to be a cliche has suddenly moved into the forefront of lay and academic concern and we seem to talk and hear about nothing else. The concept of full educational opportunity is now a serious goal rather than a convenient platitude. A confluence of forces - political, social, cultural, economic, ethical - has come about, forming relentless pressures that academic institutions cannot ignore or withstand if they intend to survive. The notion that everyone should have as much education as he can find of benefit is now being examined pragmatically - really for the first time - and many rather neglected portions of our population are now being looked at with new eyes.

Out of this newly pragmatic scrutiny wells up a realization that the learning process itself, as well as what content is now pertinent to education, is still a relatively unexplored area. It is clear that we must rethink how we learn and what we learn, how we teach and what we teach. It is equally clear that as a society we must rethink how we live and according to what principles and priorities we shape that living.

As chairman of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, I have a curious and, in some ways, a unique vantage point from which to view all these happenings. Even with admitted incompleteness of our knowledge, we have had

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pouring into us an amazing amount of information about how people and institutions are reacting to the new pressures, what they are doing, or what they are thinking about doing. (I can report to you that thus far, there has been more thinking than doing, hence the title of my remarks.) If not too much movement and progress are evident, there is at least a host of intentions; most of them well motivated, some vaguely conceived and a few springing out of a desire for publicity, or a hope for economy or, in a few and thankfully rare instances, a tendency toward cupidity. Altogether they form an intriguing set of techniques that I should like to identify for you before moving on to a discussion of the dangers and possibilities these manifestations represent. And as I try to cover both of these topics, I hope you will forgive the sketchiness with which I must do this because of the time allotted this morning.

II

Different institutions and individuals have reacted to the great outcry for educational change in differing ways. The techniques of this reaction are interesting to note and classify. Some are defensive, some non-committal, some aggressive to the point of fierceness. The only characteristic they have in common is a reflection of the need to react in some way; nobody dares to ignore what is happening whether or not he chooses to agree with it.

One of these reactions in the defensive category, for example, might be labelled the "get thee behind me, Satan," technique. This is used by institutions or individuals convinced that we already live in the best of all possible educational worlds. They cordially but firmly maintain that external degrees, or, in fact, any other relatively flexible opportunities for study are inevitably bound to destroy today's standards. Sometimes there are elitist overtones to their arguments and, more often than not, a straightforward unwillingness to change much of what they have been doing for the past few decades. In their eyes the external degree is not only inherently different, but inherently infectious and debilitating in its academic effects. There will continue to be a certain cogency in this argument unless and until more documentation emerges to prove that their fears are unfounded.

In the noncommital camp, there are a number of gradations such as the "grasping at straws," or "new wine in old bottles" or, in a slightly more dramatic form, the "Look, Ma - I'm dancing" technique. These are all designed to show that non-traditional forms have always been used and that all we require is a strengthening of adult continuing education as presently practiced. This will solve everyone's need and, at the same time, will keep educational approaches safely traditional. Once again, there is a certain amount of validity in this argument, since the statistics of continuing education look impressive and the achievements seem significant. The trouble is that the public wants much more than is currently offered, wants it in a different and more flexible style, and contains large segments which have thus far been served very little, if at all, by continuing education.

On the aggressive side, we again have several reactions. There is the "You name it - we have it", technique, the "Get to the head of the line" techinque, the "How do I get a piece of the action?" technique and the "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever" technique. The first of these shows an eagerness to supply whatever is asked for coupled with a belief that practically all the

new forms are already in being and are regularly employed. Whether this is actually so is open to question, but the intention is clearly apparent. A much more aggressive approach is the second one in which the desire is to be first with new and well publicized opportunities even though most of them are comparatively untested. The danger in this, of course, lies in the expectations raised in the mind of the student which may not be capable of realization. New programs and structures have sometimes been announced long before detailed plans have been worked.out. The third technique represents the opportunities some of the alternative systems see for themselves, proprietary or plainly commercial systems, who now identify a large, new market for what they have to offer. And the final reaction is one of almost fanatical, starry-eyed idealism that reflects a virtually total turning away from present educational practice and sees an almost limitlessly flexible set of opportunities in a non-traditional approach. In this view, we are moving toward a wonderful new world of marvelously effective educational outcomes growing out of the sheer happiness of learning and requiring no special order or rigor.

I am merely identifying these several approaches, not commenting on them critically. All together, they represent a recognition of the need for change and have drawn a great deal of public attention. Indeed, they form the material for the greatest educational debate of our time. Every conference, including this one, seems to center on the actual or impending shift to the non-traditional concept. As a result, a note of repetitiveness is already becoming a characteristic of conferences. Over and over, we hear the same discussions of these new forms of education, discussions that run the gamut from enthusiasm to distaste to outright horror. And meanwhile, there is still insufficient evidence to prove the merits or limitations of any program that has actually been tried.

If we are not careful, we will talk the non-traditional concept to death long before we have worked with it sufficiently to prove its effectiveness. We will also concentrate eventually much more on transplanting the programs of other institutions to our own than on creating the particular sort of approach that suits each individual institution. If diversity has been one of the great strengths of American education in the past (and I believe it has been), then we need an equally, or perhaps more fully, developed diversity as we create non-traditional opportunity. This does not mean working in academic isolation. It means rather that institutions share strengths and relate according to their own objectives and needs, not according to any preconceived pattern used elsewhere.

The educational debate is thus more productive when it starts with the aims and objectives of the institution itself and when a great part of it takes place on the campus itself or on the campuses of a group of institutions close to each other physically and philosophically. And in its early stages at least, it should center on an understanding of what is making non-traditionalism inevitable and what attitudes toward change in general are reflected in the thinking of all the constituencies of a campus. Unless there is an atmosphere of receptivity leading to acceptance and willingness to move in a new direction, any non-traditional efforts will ultimately prove to be abortive.

III

Suppose we try to draw up some sort of balance sheet on the external degree, which is our major consideration this morning and which represents one of the most discussed outcomes of non-traditional or unconventional study. Even though such a summary balance may be incomplete, it may serve perhaps as a recapitulation of many aspects of the debate now going on. And it may draw together in one place the pros and cons, the possibilities and the dangers, the hopes and the pitfalls that such a different educational arrangement has to offer. (The Commission, by the way, will publish later this year, with the guidance of its subcommittee on the external degree, a comprehensive book on the external degree written under its auspices by Cyril Houle and John Summerskill. Whether this book will agree with my own present assessment, I have no idea, but I believe it will be a valuable and timely addition to the literature on this important subject.)

1. Without putting the dangers attributed to the external degree in any particular order, let me start with the danger of deterioration of standards. This is undoubtedly mentioned more than any other. And indeed, it should be, since it involved the greatest fears being felt about the external degree. There is most certainly an added difficulty in adhering to quality education when the circumstances surrounding it may be so radically changed. It is not an insoluble difficulty, but solutions may be complicated, slow in coming, and probably achievable only after considerable trial and error. And there is an added problem when one considers academic standards: are they to be the traditional ones we have always accepted without question, or do these, too, now need re-examination?

2. The mention of standards calls to mind the parallel danger of a proliferation of degrees far beyond what is already troubling many people in academic life. Over 1600 different degrees are now being offered. It would appear that with the move toward more and more unconventional approaches, this number will tend to increase even further. How to be assured that the degree is not debased thereby becomes a very real problem.

3. Another danger is that of using the external degree as a political instrument. Much has been said about the financial savings that can accrue through the use of this form of education. Expectations have been raised that major capital outlays will no longer be necessary and that additional economies will evolve from new types of curricula and techniques of methodology. All this is very tempting to state legislatures so hard pressed to provide funds in large amounts for so many social services in addition to education. It is perhaps a valid assumption also even though it is yet unproved, provided that proper safeguards as to the nature and quality of education are established. There is already a trend developing in this country toward more involvement in academic decision-making by legislative committees; the new opportunity offered by the use of the external degree as a substitute for current educational practice may well serve to hasten that trend.

4. A very real danger rests in the expectations that are being raised in many quarters without solidly developed program plans to support them. Two kinds of expectations could very well turn out to be serious disappointments to the prospective student: first, that the external degree possibilities offered are indeed different enough from the conventional in material or in

flexible arrangements to create a truly achievable academic goal; second, that what is being offered the student is more than a motley collection of largely unrelated parts not yet fashioned into a flexible but intellectually rewarding whole. The enthusiasm already generated in thousands of prospective students, particularly those beyond traditional college age, could soon evaporate and change to apathy when their expectations are not met. A relatively small number of good or excellent external degree programs might emerge, but not enough to take adequate care of the needs of hitherto unserved population segments.

5. The very nature of the modern external degree with its reliance on highly individualized study made possible by television, cassettes, correspondence courses, and the like, causes many educators to fear the danger of academic isolation for the student. The cross-stimulation of faculty and students, the classroom or seminar interchanges of thought amon the members, the possibilities that campuses afford - these can easily be lost if the external approach is carried to an extreme. What is the appropriate mixture of personal interplay and solitude necessary to create the appropriate climate for learning? This is a question still to be answered more completely than it has been. And there are so many changes to be rung, so many combinations of organization and method and material that the question may never be answered to everyone's satisfaction. Still, the same danger might be cited for traditional forms of education as they are presently used in some places.

6. Yet another danger for the external degree centers on the curricular vaguen with which it can easily be surrounded. Much more has been said and written thus far about the style and forms and methods and measurements of non-traditional approaches to an external degree, rather than about the content. An external degree can be highly traditional in the intellectual content it covers or it can be actually radical in its material. It can be merely a re-grouping of old elements or it can be comprised of totally new ones. Thus far, there has been only a beginning of attempts to define the subject matter in other than conventional terms. Yet the outcry that has echoed on our campuses has not been only about dullness and ineptitude and rigidity of forms and regulations; it has seriously questioned our intellectual assumptions and the material we use as a result of these assumptions. Is the subject matter we offer always relevant to the needs of these new groups of students? Is there an appropriate linking of the timeless and the contemporary? Is the material for one age group always suitable for another? These are still largely unexplored questions although they are constantly on everyone's lips. The external degree offered by traditional educational institutions in traditional ways may soon be rejected unless such questions are dealt with.

7. One of the most obvious dangers the external degree presents is its threat to the future of private colleges. If a considerable proportion of students of college age were to discover that alternative systems or patterns of higher education were more closely related to their needs than is the conventional system, and especially if they were to discover that there were financial economies as well, the private colleges would soon find themselves in even worse straits than they are today. Ironically, if the private colleges wanted to adapt themselves to new forms and approaches, they have the least resources with which to do so. In Great Britain, students below a certain age

are ruled out of candidacy for the external degree; I doubt, however, that such a rule could be made generally effective in this country. The effect of non-traditional forms upon these institutions, therefore, may cause some major dislocations in their future development.

8. A final danger that the external degree may create is that of complicating still further the important debate over what constitutes an educated person. Perhaps this is not a danger at all, but is rather a helpful development. We are all so much involved in the impediment of learning - the access, the measuring, the grading, the institutional structures, the financing, the governance, the bricks and mortar, the degree-granting process - that we forget the basic issue about internal or external degrees, or, indeed, any portion of what we call education. What is it all intended to achieve? What are the characteristics of an educated person, and what can a college or university or any agency or any experience contribute toward creating such a person? Are the characteristics of an educated person different now because of the changes in our society, and, if so, how do they differ from any earlier concepts? Are the objectives of the external degree different from those of other degrees, or does this degree merely represent another way of reaching the same goal? What are the desirable outcomes of any degree to be acquired by the student? These questions are actually more fundamental than those that have been the major preoccupation of the proponents of change. The answers to them are still vague in contrast to the clarity of detail with which the mechanics of new programs are being fashioned. Every institution and every educator will have to wrestle with such questions and answers if more than superficial solutions are to be reached.

IV

The other side of the balance sheet - the possibilities the external degree may hold for higher education - should be set against the kinds of dangers I have been suggesting to you. These are not inconsiderable. And as we think about them we should remember that we do so in the context of the strong pressures toward educational reform of which you are fully aware.

1. A possibility spoken of more frequently than any other is that of flexibility of form, a breaking away from earlier and more rigid requirements such as residency on campus, prescribed courses, credit hours, and the like. It allows the occasional interruption of study, the inclusion of work experience or travel or independent projects. It raises the question of judging by competence and performance as well as by the more formal or conventional tools of measurement. It encompasses the re-grouping of knowledge, new inter-relationships of disciplines, the use of modules or units of work rather than traditional courses, the use of presently developed electronic teaching devices such as television, radio, cassettes, computers - a great array that can be shaped and re-shaped in various combinations as need or change dictates. The path to an external degree can have all or few or none of the characteristics of flexibility, but the chances are that it will have at least some.

2. Another possibility closely linked to flexibility is the added diversification of programs and structures and styles of learning that the external degree may encourage. As I said earlier, diversity has always been hailed as a great strength of higher education, and rightly so. The development of a multiplicity of new approaches through the external degree and non-traditional study in general is a significant addition to that diversity. The student's options are increased in proportion to the number of program variations he can find within reach geographically or in some other way. At a time when educational opportunities are expanding for new populations and more mature age groups, added diversity of programs, structures, and methods is necessary and desirable component.

3. A dramatic possibility closely linked to the external degree is that of a widespread adoption of the concept of individualized learning. The student-mentor relationship has always been championed as coming closer to an ideal learning pattern than any other. But most traditional institutions, either by choice or by necessity, have moved steadily toward relatively large groupings of students, not only for instruction, but for admissions selection, program choices, calendars, and other campus elements. Properly devised and practiced, the guidance of the student through the process that wins him the external degree can be a highly individualized matter. It can deal more readily and more intellingently with the two most controlling factors in a person's success as a student: his capability for additional learning and the strength and direction of his motivation.

4. The external degree, together with accompanying non-traditional forms and methods of learning, promotes the possibility of giving new strength and meaning to the philosophy of lifetime learning. This philosophy has been expounded ever since formal systems of education came into being, but it has never been fully understood or accepted. With new and broader opportunities made available to adult populations, there is at least the likelihood that education may come closer to being understood and welcomed and used as a continuing attribute of life. Whether or not the goal is one of acquiring a degree, more flexible approaches and more diverse offerings should encourage people to turn more often to education as part of life's enrichment.

5. I think it is logical to expect that the development of different patterns for the external degree will increase the possibility of more community involvement in the educational process. There is a role for other cultural and social agencies to play as an addition to the patterns of learning and hence a drawing together of the formal and informal. There is a set of additional laboratories in which to work and new kinds of educational talent to use. One can only conjure with the thought of what new understandings, what new sympathetic attitudes and support for education community involvement could bring about. Such involvement is very likely to happen, and, with proper monitoring, can lead to beneficial results on both sides. The prediction can safely be made that few institutions of learning will continue to exist much longer with high walls of aloofness and separatism surrounding them.

6. Coupled with the burgeoning of community involvement is the possibility of a joining of academic institutions with alternative systems of learning to create a shared and total process. Business, industry, the

military, proprietary institutions of many types - these have unique contributions to make. Their activities are more widespread, more appealing, and stronger already than many of us realize. These systems are, indeed, competitors for the attention of the student in many real ways, and they must be reckoned with as one looks at the whole spectrum of student choice. To ignore them would be folly; to find ways to cooperate with them and to fit their particular and peculiar strengths into the student's individual need as an adjunct to what colleges and universities offer would be a much wiser course of action.

7. It goes almost without saying that the external degree has great possibilities for affecting the character and style and structure of the internal degree. The traditional pattern in the traditional institution is bound to feel pressures from traditional, college-age students for changes in current practices. This need not mean a weakening of the college or a loss of the sense of rigor and self-discipline in the student. It can mean instead an adaptation to a changing world within a relatively traditional framework for those who prefer a more sheltered and more highly structural educational pattern. It is still another part of the diversity we spoke of earlier, a very sound part, with the external degree exerting a more benign and milder influence rather than creating radical change.

8. The rising interest in the external degree and the thousands of new students of all ages and walks of life that it may attract offer a new and perhaps more positive reason for reassessing the sources, the extent, and allocation of financial support of higher education in the immediate years ahead. We have long been accustomed to certain educational support concepts and formulas and programs. It is hard for many of us to imagine others or to look kindly upon the changes that may now be necessary. Even without the impact of educational change and the rising number of clientele, higher education already is clearly in a period of austerity that could, in some specific instances, quickly become a period of disaster. The only things certain about our financial problems are first, that they will grow more rather than less acute during the next five years, and second, that we shall have to find ways to help ourselves much more than we are presently doing if we expect large amounts of external help as well. Patchwork efforts to stem the tide will soon prove insufficient and even abortive. What is now required is a total re-examination of the financial picture as it is and the exploration of many future options, no matter how unconventional, ingenious, or complicated they may seem. The external degree may be one of such options, one that could ease or somehouw transfer some of the burden each institution is now carrying.

9. A final possibility the external degree and the non-traditional approach may offer is more fundamental to the educational process itself rather than to methods or structures or financing. It is the fostering of an attitude that accepts the swiftness and the inevitability of change and the correspondingly changing aspirations engendered in the minds and hearts of students, whoever and wherever they are. Basic educational objectives may well remain the same for an institution. But within those objectives and guided by them, all sorts of shiftings and adaptations will be necessary, continuously necessary, if society is to be adquately and productively served. A commitment to this kind of realization and a willingness to act on that commitment are, therefore, major factors in how successfully our higher

education structures or systems or programs will weather the increasing demands made upon them. Life in the educational world has never been easy; it will be even more difficult from now on. But there is no occasion to feel a sense of despair or defeat when we know that the American people want more rather than less education.

V

The external degree is only one of the phenomena now about to affect the future of higher education. It is only one of many elements that have long been with us but are only now being seen through new eyes and in the light of new aspirations. It can be fashioned wisely or foolishly, boldly or timidly, tentatively or with a sense of commitment. It is not an isolated venture in education; it is one of many ventures already apparent. How well it serves its purposes will depend on what it demands and the open-mindedness with which it sets up the structure and the tools for meeting its demands. There are no ways to ignore its presence; there are only ways to make sure of its validity. It has dangers and it has possibilities, but we should remember that academic traditionalism is equally plagued and blessed.

I would urge, therefore, that we add more elements of action to the current spate of talk. I would urge that each one examine his own institution cooly and calmly, but quickly also in view of what he knows is happening around him. I would urge that he move toward some understanding and agreement on his campus as to what role that specific institution can play in serving a society such as ours. And I would urge that he do this with a sense of being part of the vital, dynamic movement of that society, not reluctantly and with a feeling that he is surrendering his educational values. If we are to have an educational revolution, let us be a controlling influence within it, not controlling in the deadening or defeatist sense of the word, but in providing guarantees that intellectual quality of many sorts is still the touchstone by which we can measure our educational goal. Let us use such a revolution to make education stronger - different, no doubt, but stronger in its contribution to the growth of each individual.